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AUTHOR Blackwood, Charlene; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study examined how much time college students spend reading for pleasure, when they do the most pleasure reading, and whether or not parental encouragement plays a role in pleasure reading habits. Subjects, 219 female and 113 male college seniors at a small public liberal arts university, completed three questionnaires as part of the institution's outcomes assessment program. The first questionnaire elicited demographic information; the second determined whether students were learning oriented or grade oriented; and the third obtained information on students' pleasure reading habits. Results indicated that: (1) most of the subjects (approximately 88%) did read for pleasure; (2) choices tended towards current events and literature, with newspapers as the preferred choice of medium; (3) subjects read more during vacation than during the school term; and (4) parental encouragement, parent occupation level, and parent educational level had no significant effect on the subjects' pleasure reading habits. (One figure of data is included; 12 references and the questionnaires are attached.) (RS)

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PLEASURE READING BY COLLEGE STUDENTS: FACT OR FICTION?

**Charlene Blackwood, University of Alabama;
Sandy S. Flowers, Julia S. Rogers, and
Irene M. Staik, University of Montevallo**

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PLEASURE READING BY COLLEGE STUDENTS: FACT OR FICTION?

During the mid to late 1970's, an undergraduate general education reform movement swept the country. This movement was in response to what the academic world labeled a decline in generally educated persons. According to the 1977 Carnegie report, Missions of the College Curriculum, students were achieving success in their major fields of study, but were deficient in the area of general education. Though many educators were in agreement with this report, few could agree on what to do about the problem, or even what constituted a generally educated person. The Carnegie report (cited in Gaff, 1988, p.4) listed the following as characteristics of such a person: "The abilities to read, speak, compute, and think clearly; broad general knowledge; critical intelligence; moral sensitivity; and the ability to work independently and with others". Liberal Education (Gaff, 1988, p.27) reports that general education is "what educated the whole person for everything and anything--human relation, private and public problem solving, best use of leisure, and responsible citizenship". Still other definitions include "the yearning for integration in a disintegrated world" (Gaff, 1988, p.6); the enhancement of formal curriculum by out-of-class learning (Gaff, 1988); "the ability to explore and appreciate the imaginative presentation of human experience through literary, visual, performing, and other arts" (University of Montevallo); "to develop inner resources such as imagination, a sense of wonder self-discipline, and a habit of critical inquiry so that they may engage in lifelong, self-directed learning" (University of Montevallo); "to pursue questions in which you have a stake" (Schnieder, 1988, p.13); "inquiry, abstract logical thinking, and critical analysis" (American Association of Colleges, 1988, p.15); and

"partaking in and contributing to the richness of culture" (Pace, 1990, p.7). Though these partial definitions are quite diversified, all have one theme in common: Generally educated persons should have the ability and desire to inquire about their cultural surroundings, themselves, or their world.

The educational reform movement varied from institution to institution, but included drastic changes in the curriculum of most. Colleges and universities began to place less emphasis on the "major" curriculum and more emphasis on the major curriculum within a general education curriculum (Gaff, 1988).

Now, a decade later, numerous colleges and universities have begun strengthening the general education curricula in their undergraduate programs (Gaff, 1988). After all this effort though, are colleges and universities graduating generally educated persons? According to Pace (1990, p.101) "students report that they have made substantial progress in critical thinking, individual inquiry, breadth of knowledge, and effective knowledge as well as specialized knowledge from their major field of study". One means of validating this report is to question students about their "habits" in an area supposedly covered by the general education curriculum. Since a common theme in general education definitions is that of inquiry, this seems to be a good area to question students about. But, how can students be questioned about their habits of inquiry? One way would be to question them about their extra-curricular reading habits, since "the inquiry of a mature scholar may be almost completely contained within the mental activities of reading" (Thelan, cited in Robinson, 1961, p.36). Studies show that students do appear to have good attitudes toward reading. One such study was performed at an opendoor

junior college by McCreath (1975). All 89 participants were enrolled in a reading improvement program, and 91% were minorities. The students reported that they had a good attitude toward reading. Their responses however, indicate that 58% of the students either "sometimes" or "never" participated in the reading activities assessed. A similar study at a private college also found that students reported their attitudes toward reading were high, yet their abilities in reading tested at only average (Cretilli, Dulin, & Chester, 1976). Obviously students realize the importance of reading but do not necessarily do it regularly or well. Compared to the general population and to junior high school students, however, college students seem to read more of certain kinds of materials. Anders and Cardell (1978) found that college students read more newspapers and magazines than the general population or junior high school students. The general population read more trade magazines while the junior high school students read more fiction and non-fiction. The previously mentioned research by McCreath (1975) also found that college students preferred newspapers and magazines as their choice of reading material. When they did read books, they preferred "adventures & romances" and "nature & outdoor life" over "religion & religious life" and "science & technology" (Cretilli et al, 1976).

Although there is evidence concerning students attitudes toward reading and on the medium students choose to read, very little research exists on how much time college students spend reading for pleasure, when they do the most pleasure reading, and whether or not parental encouragement plays a role in pleasure reading habits. Sharon (1973) reported that the average adult read about 14 hours per week. Yarington (1961)

found similar results in college freshmen, with the average time spent reading per week varying from 10 to 21 hours. These studies, however, included all reading, not just pleasure reading.

As colleges and universities continue to move toward generally educating all students, valid information regarding the outcomes of these efforts is seriously needed. Although much literature exists on how and why general education should be a part of every post-secondary undergraduate institution, little research exists on the actual outcomes of these efforts. The Pleasure Reading Survey (Rogers & Staik, 1990) has attempted to answer some of the questions regarding general education outcomes. This survey questions students about how much time they spend reading for pleasure, when and what they read for pleasure, and if they had early parental encouragement to read for pleasure. The results of this survey should reveal whether or not this one aspect of general education--inquiry--indicates the students' tendencies for lifelong learning.

METHODS

SUBJECTS:

The sample used in this study was comprised of 333 seniors (219 females, 113 males, and 1 unspecified) at a small public liberal arts university in the Spring of 1990. Over 90% of the subjects were between the ages of 20 and 22.

PROCEDURE:

Seniors at this university must complete certain assessment instruments as part of the institution's outcomes assessment program. These instruments consist of three questionnaires: a demographic survey (The Montevallo Student Survey), the LOGO scale

(Eison, Polio, and Milton, 1982), and the Pleasure Reading Questionnaire (Rogers and Staik, 1990). All were given at the same time as the College Measures Outcomes Program exam (COMP). Appendix A contains the Pleasure Reading Survey and the Montevallo Student Survey. The LOGO scale attempts to determine whether students are learning oriented or grade oriented. Only a few questions from the LOGO scale were used for this study (see Appendix B). The Pleasure Reading Questionnaire was developed to obtain information on students' pleasure reading habits. The demographic questionnaire was used to collect personal data on the students such as the level of education and occupation of their parents. Of interest in this survey were the types of books, magazines, and newspapers these seniors read and how often they read them. The entire testing process, including COMP, took three hours and the students recorded their answers on scannable answer sheets. The surveys were collected and then analyzed and tabulated using SAS®.

Results

The data collected indicate that approximately 88% of the students questioned read for pleasure. A Chi Square analysis of pleasure reading habits by sex showed that the females at this institution tend to read slightly more than the males. Of those responding, 90% of the females and 84% of the males reported that they read for pleasure. A large majority of the students read more during vacation than during the school term. A Pearson correlation indicated a relationship between sex and when the

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students read more. It was found that although on the average females read more for pleasure than males, males read slightly more during the school term.

Insert figure 1 here

Initial hypothesis suggested that parental encouragement would have an effect on how much the students read for pleasure. Further analysis using a *t* test concluded that parental encouragement had no significant effect on the number of hours read during school or vacation.

Demographic data were also collected on the parental education level and parental occupations. The most frequently reported occupation of mothers was homemaker and sales/clerical, with 89% reported as having at least a high school diploma. The majority of the fathers fell into either "other" professional, executive, or skilled manual categories with 85% having at least a high school diploma. Chi Square analysis of this data yielded no significant effect of parental education or occupation on whether or not the students read for pleasure.

In this study, students were also questioned about the materials they read, specifically, newspapers, magazines, and fiction and non-fiction books. Of these, newspapers were the most frequently read medium with 80% of the students responding that they read them at least once a week. Front page stories were reported to be the most read section of newspapers. Significant differences were found between the sexes regarding certain sections of the newspaper. Females read food/fashion, advice columnists, and horoscopes significantly more than males, while males read sports, and

business/financial significantly more than females. Preferred magazines were news/information and women's/family/fashion again with significant differences between the sexes. Females read women/family/fashion and religious magazines more than males. Males read outdoor/sports and news/information more than females. The most popular non-fiction books were humor/comedy, current issues/information, and short stories/plays/poetry. Of these books that had significant differences between the sexes, males read more sports/hobbies, history, and science while females read more short stories/ plays/poetry, children's books, psychology/self-help/health, and biography/autobiography. The favored fiction books were literature/classics and mysteries/action stories, both of which were read signigicantly more by females.

Discussion

It is gratifying to know that most seniors do read for pleasure and that their choices tend toward current events and literature. The large number of children's books read was surprising, but can probably be attributed to the fact that over 20% of the respondents were either early childhood or elementary education majors. Not surprising was, that as previous research has shown, college students prefer newspapers as their choice of medium.

Because the overall goal of general education programs is producing well rounded students, the wide variety of materials read by these subjects indicates a success in one such program. Frequently read media in this study that may indicate a presence of lifelong learning goals include newspapers (specifically front page stories), business and

financial magazines, news and information magazines, current issues and information, stories/plays/poetry, and literature and classics.

Another interesting finding was that students read more during vacation than during the school term. This is ironic because one focus of most general education programs is that of inquiry, yet students seem to read most when they are away from school. This may be due to the demands that school and coursework place on the students.

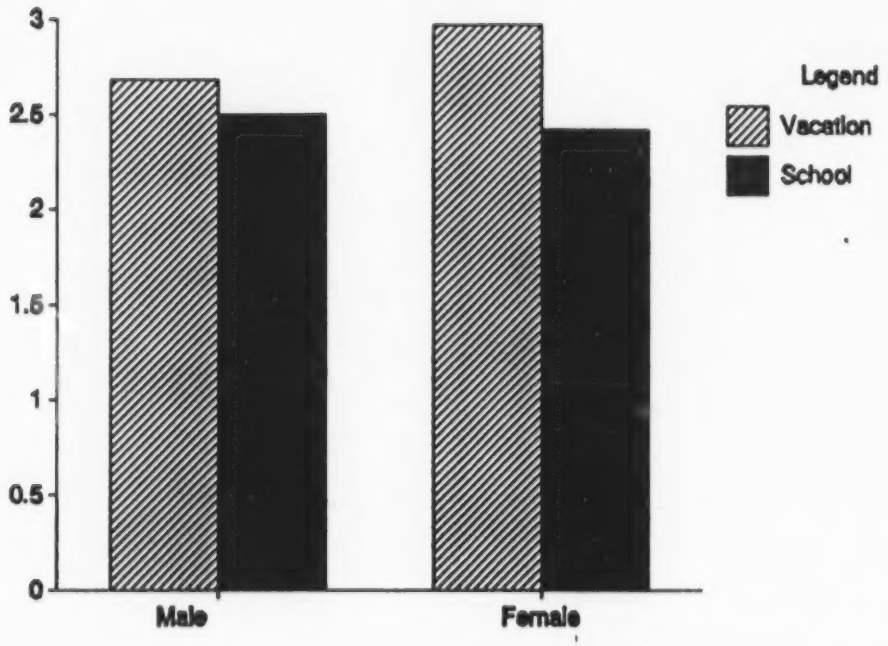
If inquiry is indeed a characteristic of the tendency for lifelong learning then the majority of these college seniors appear to have this tendency. It is uncertain, however, whether this tendency has emerged during college or was instilled in the student sometime before the college years. Since parental encouragement, and parental occupation and educational level have no significant effect on the pleasure reading habits of these students, one might suspect that the general education program at this university played a key role in shaping such habits. Such a small number of students reported that they did **not** have parental encouragement, however, these results may not be generalizable to other college student samples. That early parental encouragement does not affect the amount of reading in this study does not indicate that failure to read to and/or encourage young children to read will not affect them. It only suggests that parental encouragement may play a role in, not how much students read or if they read for pleasure, but how far they go with their education.

Future research is needed to determine exactly what role parental encouragement plays in the lifelong learning goals of students. Future research is also needed to

compare the freshmen reading habits with those of seniors. A longitudinal study of change in reading habits would be particularly useful in determining if the general education program does affect lifelong learning goals such as that of inquiry.

Figure 1

Reading Hours During School and Vacation By Sex



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APPENDIX A

MONTEVALLO STUDENT SURVEY

This survey is part of research being conducted to determine some of the characteristics of students at the University of Montevallo. Although your name and ID number are requested, they will be used only in relating scores on this questionnaire to other data for statistical analysis purposes. Your responses to individual items will not be revealed to anyone. If you would like to see your scores on this, and have them interpreted to you, contact Mrs. Rogers, Director of Academic Research, 102 Calkins Hall, 665-6010.

INSTRUCTIONS

Please print your name in the rectangular blanks under "NAME" on side one of your answer sheet, with last name first, (no comma) a space, then your first name, a space, and then your middle initial (no period necessary). If your name is too long to fit in the blanks provided, leave off the middle initial, and, if necessary, the last letters of your first name. Next, darken in (with the pencil provided) the corresponding circles for the letters of your name. In the block marked "SEX," to the right of the "NAME" area on the answer sheet, darken in the "M" circle if you are male or the "F" circle if you are female.

In the column headed "GRADE or EDUC" darken in the circle numbered 13 if you are a freshman or 16 if you are a senior. Darken the circle for the month of your birth. Fill in the day and the last two digits of the year of your birth and darken the appropriate circles.

Under "IDENTIFICATION NUMBER" (below the "NAME" area), print your nine-digit student identification number (Social Security number) in the rectangles provided (under columns headed A through I). Do not leave spaces or put in dashes. Leave column J blank. Next, darken in the circles corresponding to your ID number.

For the next six questions, please use the area under "Special Codes" on your answer sheet. Indicate in column K your mother's occupation and in column L your father's occupation, using the following codes:

1. Physician/Lawyer
2. Teacher
3. Other professional
4. Homemaker
5. Executive
6. Sales/Clerical
7. Skilled manual (electronic technician, toolmaker, etc.)
8. Semiskilled manual (barber, carpenter, bricklayer, etc.)
9. Unskilled manual (custodian, farm laborer, gas station attendant, etc.)

Indicate in column M the highest level of your mother's education and in column N the highest level of your father's education, using the following scale:

1. Less than a high school diploma
2. High school diploma but less than junior/technical college diploma.
3. Junior/technical college diploma but less than college degree.
4. College (baccalaureate) degree
5. Graduate study beyond a college degree

Indicate your major in colmns O-P, using the two-digit code from the pink "Majors List." Proceed now to the next page and answer the questions on the Student Survey of Attitudes.

PLEASURE READING QUESTIONNAIRE

Please indicate for each item below your answer(s) to the questions or information asked. This questionnaire pertains to your "reading for pleasure" and not to academic reading which is an assigned part of your college course work. Academic reading may be indicated only if you pursue it for pleasure reading, and it is not assigned for a class. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

****

MARK YOUR ANSWERS ON THE SAME ANSWER SHEET YOU HAVE BEEN USING, BUT START WITH ITEM # 50.

50. Do you read for pleasure?
    1. Yes
    2. No

51. Did your parents read to you and/or encourage you to read when you were a young child?
    1. Yes
    2. No

52. During school, how may hours per week do you read for pleasure?
    1. 0 or less than 1
    2. 1-2
    3. 3-4
    4. 4+

53. During vacation times, how many hours per week do you read for pleasure?
    1. 0 or less than 1
    2. 1-2
    3. 3-4
    4. 4+

54. How often do you read newspapers?
    1. Not at all
    2. Seldom/rarely
    3. About once a week (e.g., Sunday only)
    4. 2-5 times a week
    5. Almost every day

55. When you read newspapers, do you
    1. buy a copy/subscribe
    2. go to the library and use a copy there
    3. borrow a copy from someone
    4. other

PLEASE TURN TO NEXT PAGE AND CONTINUE

For questions 56 through 68, indicate how regularly, when you read newspapers, you read the indicated sections.
Use the following scale:

1. Never or rarely
2. Sometimes
3. Frequently or always

56. Headlines only
57. Front page stories
58. Editorials
59. Sports
60. Food/Fashion
61. Entertainment
62. Comics
63. Health
64. Advice Columnists
65. Horoscopes
66. Business/Financial
67. Want ads
68. Other

69. How often do you go to the library to read magazines on file there?
    1. Never or rarely
    2. Sometimes/occasionally
    3. Frequently

For questions 70 through 80, indicate what sort of magazines you read for pleasure.
Use the following scale:

1. Don't read
2. Read occasionally
3. Read regularly (at least once/twice a month) but do not subscribe
4. Subscribe and read regularly

71. Women's/Family/Fashion
72. Music/Art
73. Religious
74. News/Information
75. Fitness/Health
76. Outdoor/Sports
77. Hobby/Special interest
78. Science
79. Travel
80. Financial/Career

PLEASE TURN TO NEXT PAGE AND CONTINUE

For questions 81 through 100, indicate the sort of books you read for pleasure. Use the following scale:

1. **Never or rarely**
2. **Sometimes**
3. **Frequently**

Non-fiction

81. History
82. Biography/autobiography
83. Current issues/information
84. Sports/hobbies
85. Psychology/self-help/health
86. Science
87. Music/arts
88. Travel
89. Religious
90. Supernatural/parapsychology
91. How-to books
92. Humor/comedy
93. Nature/animal
94. Short stories/plays/poetry
95. Children's books

Fiction

96. Romance novels
97. Mysteries/action stories
98. Science fiction/fantasy/horror
99. Literature/classics
100. General fiction

THANK YOU FOR ANSWERING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. IT WILL HELP US DETERMINE THE READING HABITS OF OUR STUDENTS.

Appendix B

Questions used from LOGO (Eison, Polio, & Milton, 1982).

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither disagree nor agree
4. Agree
5. Agree strongly

1. I find the process of learning new material fun.

2. I try to make time for outside reading despite the demands of my coursework.

3. I browse in the library even when not working on a specific assignment.

Acknowledgements

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